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SUBJECT: KING ABDALLAH FIVE YEARS ON

REF: A. AMMAN 7619

[B](#). AMMAN 6736

[C](#). AMMAN 5784

[D](#). AMMAN 5109

[E](#). 03 AMMAN 2528

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Jordan's King Abdallah continues to enjoy firm backing from the Hashemites' traditional pillars of support -- the East Bank tribes and the security/military services -- as well as the economic elite. His supporters give him credit for navigating Jordan through several regional crises during his short tenure. Others express disappointment that this liberal, Western-educated King has not moved more quickly to address the core problems slowing Jordan's development. They highlight as key challenges a widening gap between the rich and poor, discrimination against the majority Palestinian population, restrictions on public freedoms, corruption, and a bloated patronage system. The King's support of the Iraq war and his close association with other unpopular U.S. policies in the region expose him to criticism at home, but do not affect his strategic relationship with the U.S. and determination to support actively U.S. efforts to stabilize the region. The security environment has grown more tenuous, as Jordan has become an increasingly attractive target to extremists, including homegrown terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In the face of these challenges, Abdallah has demonstrated steadily-improving political judgment, and we do not see a threat to the stability of the regime. End Summary.

PILLARS OF SUPPORT SOLID

[1](#)2. (C) Five years after ascending the throne, King Abdallah's standing with the Hashemites' traditional pillars of support -- the East Bank tribes, the military, the security services, and the economic elite -- is solid. The King's advisers and supporters credit him with navigating Jordan through difficult regional crises, boosting Jordan's international image, instituting needed economic and social reforms, and defining a "vision" to transform this resource-poor, youth-heavy country into a model of prosperity and pluralism for the region. King Abdallah has tried to de-emphasize somewhat the symbols of the monarchy in favor of building a national identity. The symbols are there -- portraits of father and son adorn nearly every government building in Jordan -- but national pride and civic responsibility (embodied in the "Jordan First" campaign launched two years ago) have been this king's chief public themes. Earlier this summer, Abdallah publicly chastised members of Jordan's Olympic team for hoisting his picture during the opening ceremony, saying he would have preferred they displayed the flag as a symbol of the nation. Nonetheless, the team's behavior may have reflected an atmosphere that encourages, when in doubt, such displays.

JORDANIANS GRIPE ABOUT SLOW PACE OF REFORM

[1](#)3. (C) When asked their primary worry, Jordanians almost uniformly point to the economy. They laud King Abdallah's focus on economic development, but despite impressive growth under his watch (up to seven percent GDP growth forecast for this year), many ordinary people say there has not yet been an improvement in living standards. Some complain the rich are living ever more ostentatiously while poverty deepens. Fuel price and sales tax increases in April are still a sore point. Dr. Taysir Abdel Jaber, deputy chairman of Jordan's Securities Commission, says the government is well aware of popular perceptions of increasing inequity and will need to do a better job equalizing the playing field, focusing more resources on poverty alleviation and job growth.

[1](#)4. (C) While pocketbook issues may be foremost in Jordanian minds, gripes about the slow pace of political and social reforms are not far behind. Some quietly express disappointment that this liberal, Western-minded king has not made more significant progress in reforming a system built on

patronage, a bloated bureaucracy, and corruption (ref C). Dr. Fares Breizat, director of polling at the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies (CSS), noted that frustration over the patronage (wasta) system is particularly acute among young Jordanians with few connections seeking to break into the professions, start their own businesses, or win jobs based on their qualifications. He offers that these long-standing problems have gotten worse under King Abdallah's watch, not better. Many Embassy contacts point to the fact that the King surrounds himself with yes men (mostly security officials and young technocrats), and complain most are still chosen for their personal, familial or tribal ties, rather than their qualifications. Jordanian-Palestinian journalist Ureib al-Rintawi says there is no space for "liberal democrats" who could help the King sell his reform agenda to the wider population. Abdallah's choice of advisers (whom Breizat terms "liberal autocrats") suggests to Rintawi that Abdallah has little real interest in making the difficult decisions necessary to realize true political and social reform in Jordan. (COMMENT: It is debatable whether there is as yet a potential popular constituency for the liberal democratic politics that intellectuals like Rintawi long for. End Comment.)

GAP BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PEOPLE

15. (C) On top of these frustrations, analysts say there is a growing disconnect between the leadership and ordinary Jordanians. King Abdallah has focused less than his father did on cultivating the personal connection with average people. While Hussein was known for taking meals regularly with tribal sheikhs and mingling with the common folk, Abdallah has concentrated on building his statesman's image. He delivers few public speeches (although his Arabic has improved notably over the last few years, his accent remains undeniably foreign). He also spends significantly more time abroad than his father did, leading some to joke that the King lives abroad and vacations in Jordan. Contacts close to the King justify his frequent international jaunts as necessary to attract foreign aid and investment. To some, however, the lack of interaction with locals shows that the King considers them too backward to be worth consulting. According to political scientist Dr. Muhammad Kheir Mustafa, many Jordanians are losing respect for leaders perceived as aloof and not honestly working for the greater good, which in turn makes it difficult to sell the King's liberalizing program to the common people.

16. (C) Loath to criticize the King publicly, the regime's detractors focus on the King's men. Critiquing the cabinet is the staple of conversation in private homes and coffeehouses, and considered safe in a country where rumor has it that one in three Jordanians is an informer. However, Abdallah's tendency to associate himself personally with the government's goals, as well as policy implementation, makes him accountable for the cabinet's failures as well as its successes -- stripping away a firewall his father had always carefully maintained. More in keeping with Hussein's experience, gossip about Abdallah's personal life is widespread. Resentment is voiced about the King and Queen's perceived lavish spending and jet-setting lifestyle, and there is talk about his roving eye. Popular perceptions about Hashemite high living are a running theme through Jordan's modern history, and only at times of acute economic crisis, such as in the late 1980s, did they become politically meaningful. The same is largely true today, but a new element is the charge that top regime figures are taking larger and more visible slices of contracts for personal gain. Although this behavior is consistent with regional norms, it contrasts with the reformist stance of King and cabinet -- and hands a (pick)pocketbook issue to the populists.

REGIONAL CRISES PRESENT MAJOR CHALLENGE

17. (C) Impatience over the slow pace of change at home is exacerbated by regional turmoil. Inheriting the throne in February 1999, Abdallah took power at a time of relative calm in the region. He commented to an interviewer in early 2000 that he intended to focus on the only challenge he foresaw for Jordan: economic development. Barely six months later, the Palestinian intifada erupted to the west. Protests in Jordan against the Israeli incursions in Jenin and the assassination of HAMAS leaders resulted in clashes between police and Jordanian demonstrators, leading to tighter restrictions on public gathering. The professional associations and the Islamic movement revived "name-and-shame" campaigns against alleged advocates of normalization with Israel. Meanwhile, Abdallah carefully guided Jordan through the aftermath of September 11 and the war in Afghanistan. He proved himself a faithful partner in USG efforts to combat Al-Qaeda -- cementing his already close

relationship with the U.S.

18. (C) The war in Iraq, however, proved even more challenging. Anti-war demonstrators in southern towns carried signs and chanted slogans critical of Abdallah and his perceived support of the American campaign. Anti-regime pamphlets appeared in several cities, prompting the security services to tighten their control over demonstrations. These direct attacks on the King were unprecedented (ref E); people were convinced that the King and senior GOJ officials were not telling them the truth about the extent of Jordan's support for the war. Some contacts say the King's reputation still suffers. Since the Iraq war, public criticism of GOJ policies, including those linked to the King, has continued if not increased. Even figures such as former PM Taher al-Masri have offered critical statements. Outside of Jordan, the King has come under fire from Palestinian officials for his perceived criticism of the Palestinian National Authority leadership. U.S. success in stabilizing the region is critical, in the King's mind, to maintaining Jordan's stability, so his active support will continue. The King's strategic alignment with the U.S. exposes him to domestic and regional critics, and his instinct is to silence rather than accommodate them in any meaningful way. Unfortunately, critical popular attitudes toward his stance have made it all the harder to advance political reforms which could empower those forces which oppose the King's association with the U.S.

REALISTIC REGIONAL POSTURE BRINGS PAYOFFS

19. (C) Abdallah wisely dropped the pretensions to regional leadership that his father could never shed. Long-expired Hashemite claims to the throne of the Hijaz, Iraq, or even leadership of the Arab nation may, by 1999, have seemed comical to Western observers. But the Saudis rightly suspected there was a gleam of irredentist ambition in Hussein's eye to the very end. By contrast, Abdallah made it known his aim was to keep the one throne his family still held, enabling him to cultivate good relations with most of the Gulf states. This more modest posture paid off when Saddam's oil largesse was abruptly ended in 2003 but quickly replaced by Saudi and Kuwaiti donations. Continuing Gulf petro-charity staves off a collapse of Jordan's economy.

THE WESTERN SALES PITCH vs. REALITY

110. (C) King Abdallah has also done an effective job of selling a modernizing vision of Jordan to the West. His articulate appearances on U.S. talk shows have boosted Jordan's international reputation. The King's adept handling of relations with U.S. congressmen and foreign dignitaries has further enhanced his international stature to the point that some Jordanians grouse that he is more popular abroad than at home. Behind the smooth delivery, however, there are aspects of everyday Jordan that the regime would prefer that the West overlook. The country's Palestinian-origin majority suffers from disproportionately low representation in a gerrymandered Parliament, as well as in the military and security services ranks (refs B and D). The option of true political participation for most Jordanians is still far off. The only viable political party remains the Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood -- which has emerged as the leading voice of popular discontent. Relations between the Hashemites and the Islamic movement have vacillated through the years. The monarchy at times used Islamists to offset the influence of Arab nationalists and socialists. However, Islamist leaders have become assertive in their criticism of the regime for its alleged acquiescence in Western "anti-Arab" foreign policies, as well as for tolerating corruption and punishing public expressions of opposition. In an October 4 press interview, for example, Hamzah Mansour, IAF Secretary General, accused the GOJ of pursuing policies "that harmed Jordan's interests" and denounced alleged government attempts to silence its critics (ref A).

111. (C) Some public freedoms have been curtailed under King Abdallah, although Jordan remains one of the more open Arab societies. A Baathist weekly newspaper has been temporarily shut down twice in the past year for criticizing the Saudi regime. Jordanians complain that the intelligence apparatus can exercise a veto over every aspect of life -- whether the media, regulating public gatherings, or getting a job. This perception reinforces a strong tendency among Jordanians today toward political passivity. CSS polls show that people's sense of justice is low, and that Jordanians are more fearful of criticizing officials since Abdallah came to power. For example, 83 percent of respondents in a 2003 study reported that they did not feel free to openly criticize the government and/or disagree with its opinion without experiencing repercussions from the security

services. In 1999, 70 percent of respondents reported such concerns. Dr. Mustafa argues that Jordan's international image masks a fragile society with key problems that need to be addressed if stability is to be maintained.

WHO ELSE BUT THE HASHEMITES?

112. (C) It is very difficult for many Jordanians to separate their national identity from the Hashemite family. The thought of Jordan without a Hashemite leader is almost inconceivable to some, both because Jordan and the Hashemites have been inextricably linked since the state's foundation, and because there is no realistic alternative to the monarchy. In a country divided between East and West Bankers and with little appetite for a religious theocracy, no other family or institution acceptable to a broad majority of Jordanians could play the Hashemites' unifying role. King Abdallah and his advisors reinforce this situation by ensuring that no figure, group or ideology emerges that could challenge the royal family's legitimacy. Even if King Abdallah were to suddenly depart the scene, the leadership of Jordan would almost certainly remain in Hashemite hands. No potential successor to the throne, however, appears to have the same reforming zeal as Abdallah.

113. (C) Despite domestic and regional challenges, we do not see a threat to the regime's stability in the near term. However, as evidenced by the terrorist plots disrupted in Jordan since 1999 (primarily instigated by homegrown extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his ilk), the regime has its share of dangerous enemies. The King's public standing over the next year will depend on his success in further promoting the economy and closing income gaps, pushing reform and weathering regional crises. Ironically, it is the traditional pillars of the regime's stability -- the East Bank tribes, the military and security services, and the entrenched economic elite -- that are the most significant barriers to economic and political reform. It is the Hashemites' traditional allies who stand to lose the most if political participation is increased, public freedoms are enhanced, and corruption contained. Because the King has aligned himself so closely with the reform agenda, a lack of progress will increase the perception that the King is not serious about broadening political participation. Faced with the concerns of his loyalists, and the certainty that opening up politically will embolden opponents of those regional security policies that the King views as critical for Jordanian stability -- including peace with Israel and alignment with the U.S. -- the King is likely to take a cautious approach to genuine political reform.

114. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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